

INDUSTRY VS. LIFESTYLE:
A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF DOWNHILL SNOW SKIING IN NORTH AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

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Since the year 2000, the price of downhill snow skiing has risen nearly 200%. Over the last five years, this price escalation has picked up, and the price of downhill snow skiing has risen 75%. This change is being driven by large snow skiing corporations who have led a movement of commercialization and consolidation in the industry. Vail Resorts is the largest of these corporations, owning over 50% of the \$3.2 billion industry. As the major giant of the industry, Vail Resorts has experienced tremendous financial success as a result of snow skiing's recent corporatization. However, this corporatization is leading to the severe marginalization and destruction of snow skiing subculture. Due to downhill snow skiing's foundational dependence on its rich and distinct subculture, this cultural destruction is causing a deterioration of the sport itself.

This thesis engages in a sociological study of the modern downhill snow skiing industry, examining issues of lifestyle sport culture, social power, corporate strategy, and cultural impact. The research exhibited herein consolidates the fragmented bodies of lifestyle sport and snow skiing literature, and draws on primary interviews and observational data. The study finds that downhill snow skiing's lifestyle sport properties create a heavy dependence on subcultural factors. As snow skiing corporations and tourists economically and socially cripple local ski town communities, they endanger not only snow skiing subculture, but the sport itself. Thus, while the corporatization and consolidation of the snow skiing industry has been a business success in the short term, it does not appear to be sustainable, and in fact, it is likely to lead to an unfavorable contraction of the snow skiing industry.

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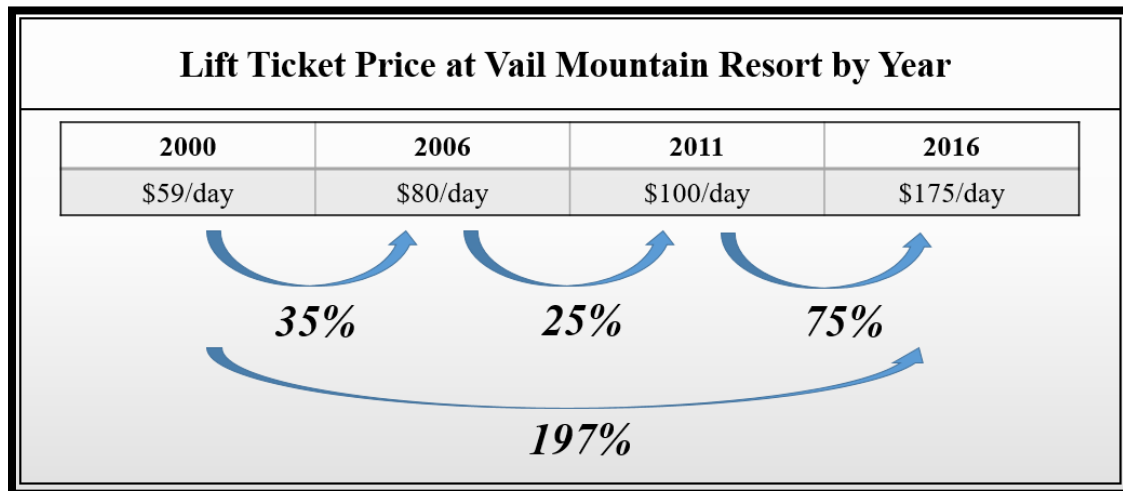
Chapter 1: Introduction

Downhill snow skiing brings to mind images of the snowy mountains, the wide open freedom of the outdoors, and fun with close friends and family. The idea of this thesis first came to me several years ago during a ski trip to Park City, Utah. I still vividly remember the first day of the trip. We were an hour away... Thirty minutes away... We were fifteen minutes away when we rounded a bend and the mountain came into view. It was spectacular—covered in bright snow, with countless long sweeping ski trails flowing down the mountain. I looked over at my dad in the driver seat and saw a huge grin spread across his face. It was going to be a good day. When we entered town, my view of the mountain became obstructed by a series of tall buildings that hadn't been there when we visited just two years before. In fact, there were a lot more buildings than there had been last time. As we pulled into the resort, we were stopped by a traffic guard who directed us to a massive parking structure that definitely hadn't been there before. As I walked up to the mountain, things felt different. How had so much development taken place in such a short time?

In the last two decades, significant change has taken place in downhill snow skiing. Large corporations have entered the industry, spurring rapid development in ski resort towns. These companies have integrated in to all aspects of the snow skiing experience. They own the mountain, the lodging, the restaurants and the shops. Vail Resorts Inc., the largest of these ski corporations, dominates nearly 50% of the market and owns most of the large ski resorts in North America. Over the last ten years, Vail Resorts and others have worked to drive up the price of the sport dramatically, resulting in rapid price escalation. Each year, more and more consumers are priced out of the sport, and the increasing cost of living in ski resort towns has

forced many locals to pack up and leave. Figure 1 shows the increase in price of a one day lift pass at a Vail Resort mountain since the year 2000:

Figure 1



The price of a one day lift pass has increased by almost 200% in the last sixteen years—75% in the last five years. The price of the sport as a whole (lodging, gear rental, etc.) has increased at this rate as well. As a result, a ski vacation is becoming too expensive for the majority of North American families, and each year more and more consumers are priced out of the sport.

When I began my research on this topic, my hypothesis was that this rapid price escalation is leading the snow skiing industry on a downward spiral. I believed that snow skiing corporations were overinflating price and unintentionally pricing out the sport's core consumer base. I hypothesized that ski corporations are unaware as to why less and less people are visiting their resorts each year, and are increasing prices out of a need to cover operating expenses. If this hypothesis had been correct, this thesis would have largely been an economic study which

researched snow skiing consumption preferences and ski resort price optimization strategy. However, my initial hypothesis was quickly disproved. The snow skiing industry is not economically suffering under the control of these ski corporations. It is thriving. Vail Resort stock, for example, is up approximately 300% in the last five years. This is remarkable growth compared to the 77% growth of the S&P 500. As it turns out, ski corporations are intentionally driving up the price of the sport in order to maximize profits. They are knowingly pricing out a large portion of snow skiing consumers, instead targeting individuals who have incomes in the upper 1% of the U.S. population. These wealthy consumers are extremely price elastic, and are willing to pay exorbitant amounts for leisure activities like snow skiing.

However, as the price of snow skiing rises to increasingly outrageous levels, the sport is changing. As Vail Resorts and others increase the cost of the sport, they are not only pricing out snow skiing's less wealthy tourists, they are also pricing out local ski town communities. These communities make up the foundation of snow skiing's distinct subculture. Not only do they serve ski resorts by working as employees, these communities drive the spirit and the passion of snow skiing. As I will discuss in Chapter 3 of this thesis, snow skiing is a lifestyle sport which makes the sport's culture critically important to its experience. As North American ski corporations marginalize and drive out local ski town communities, they severely damage snow skiing's rich and distinct subculture. I argue that as this culture and the individuals who shape it disappear, so goes the beauty and allure of the sport itself.

The following pages present the research and findings of a sociological study of downhill snow skiing in North America. First, the thesis outlines and analyzes the current academic literature which has been published on this topic. The literature review in Chapter 2 seeks to familiarize the reader with the macro drivers of the snow skiing industry, and introduces the

forms in which snow skiing and lifestyle sports are studied by academics. Starting in Chapter 3, I delve into the main content of my research, focusing on the topics of lifestyle sport culture in snow skiing, the social power dynamics of the sport, and the sociocultural impacts of the corporatization that is taking place in the snow skiing industry.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

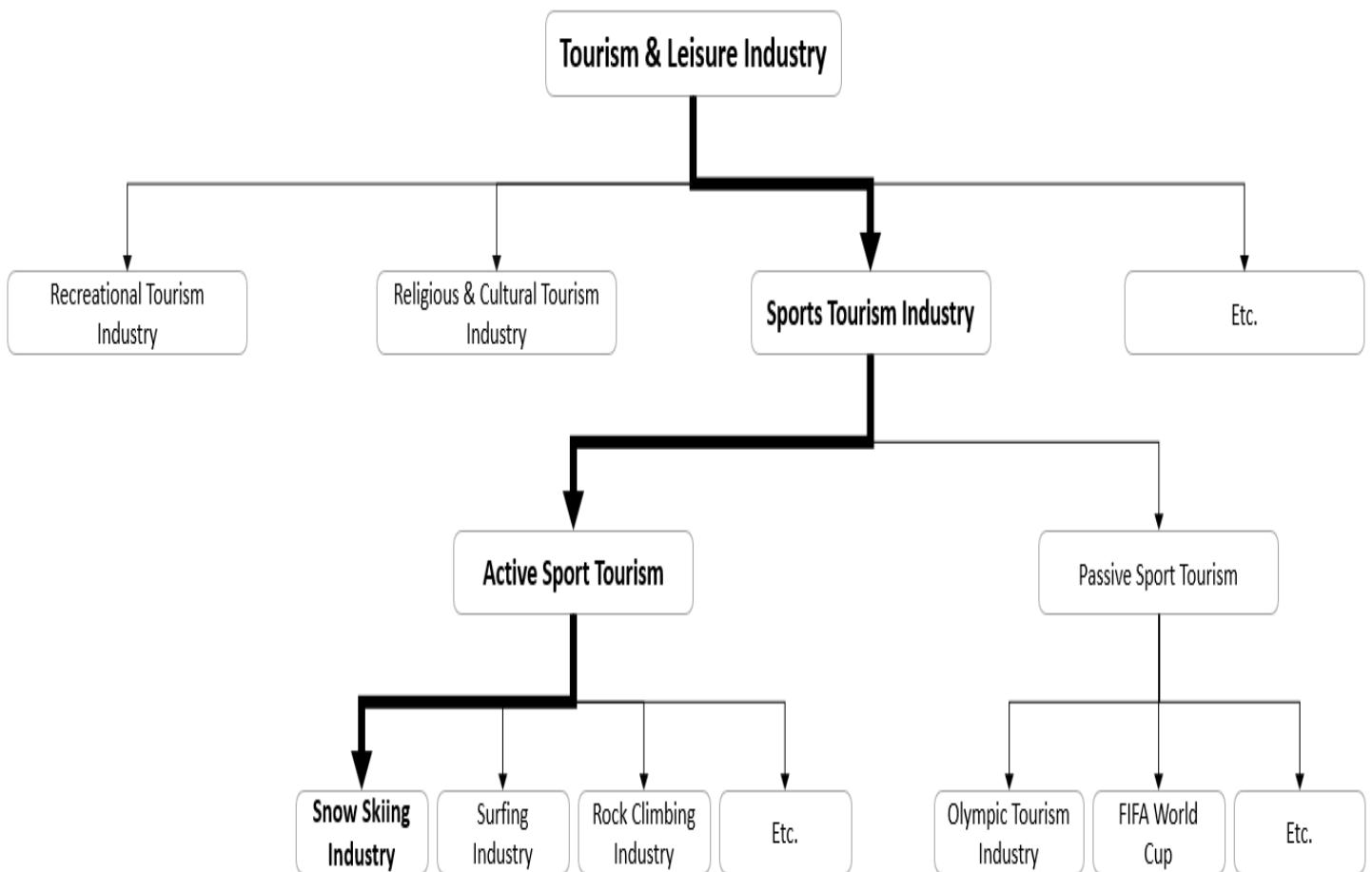
The literature that has been published on snow skiing in North America is vast in scope and in number; however, little work has been published which explores the social and corporate structures of the sport. Over the last three decades, scholars have studied at length the topics of Olympic snow skiing, snow skiing injury, ski construction and engineering, as well as snow skiing physics, forces and technique. This particular study does little to directly address these topics. For reading on these subjects, I suggest exploring *The Sociology of Sport Journal* (“SSJ”), *The Journal of Sport and Social Issues* (“JSSI”), *The International Review for the Sociology of Sport* (“IRSS”), and *The International Journal of Sports Physiology and Performance* (“IJSPP”). In the area of Olympic slalom and cross-country skiing, I suggest the work of Øyvind Sandbakk and Hans-Christer Holmberg. For snow skiing injuries, Laurie Beck. For information on modern ski construction, I recommend checking out the story of ski builder Jason Levinthal, who founded ‘Line Skis’ and ‘J Skis,’ and who invented the twin tip ski in the early 1990’s. Levinthal has revolutionized downhill ski construction over the last three decades. Finally, for reading on snow skiing physics, forces and technique, I suggest beginning with the work of Matej Supej and Nicolas Fabre.

Further, although this study addresses issues of race and gender in the context of snow skiing, I suggest exploring additional, more in depth, reading if these topics are of specific interest to you. For literature on snow skiing gender issues, I would start with the work of Holly Thorpe or Annie Gilbert Coleman, and for racial issues in snow skiing, Annie Gilbert Coleman (again) and Anthony Harrison.

The following review focuses on the literature published on the social and corporate structures of the downhill snow skiing industry, and has two primary goals. The first goal of this

review is to address the literature concerning the conditions of the tourism and leisure, sports tourism and snow skiing industries. This is done in an effort to provide the reader with a broad economic and social understanding of the relevant industry landscapes. The snow skiing industry is one sector of the broader sports tourism industry. Likewise, the sports tourism industry is one sector of the broader tourism and leisure industry. This structure is depicted by the following figure:

Figure 2



In view of this, macroeconomic factors in play in the broader industries can have significant effects on the subsequent industries. Conversely, if one establishes that the larger

industries are constant, then it is safe to conclude that change taking place in a subsequent industry is being driven by microeconomic industry factors. I will therefore examine the tourism and leisure industry and the sports tourism industry in order to determine whether the forces effecting the snow skiing industry are macroeconomic or microeconomic in nature. The second goal of this review is to bring the reader up to speed on the existing academic discourse surrounding this thesis's primary topics of study, which are lifestyle sport dynamics and culture, the social concerns of the snow skiing industry, and the corporatization of the snow skiing industry. As a result, the following literature review is broken up into six major sections and a conclusion:

1. The Tourism & Leisure Industry
2. The Sports Tourism Industry
3. The Snow Skiing Industry
4. Lifestyle Sport Dynamics & Culture
5. The Corporatization of the Snow Skiing Industry
6. The Social Concerns of the Snow Skiing Industry
7. Conclusion

These sections travel from broad to specific, and cover the key issues of the literature present in each category, particularly as they relate to snow skiing as a sport, a culture and an industry. The goal of each section is to identify the key arguments of and contributors to the literature of each category. For more detail on the specific sources used, please see the attached bibliography.

2.1: The Tourism & Leisure Industry – Literature Review

Overall, the U.S. tourism and leisure industry is very strong, largely due to favorable macroeconomic conditions. The U.S. economy is strong, steadily rising since its recovery in

approximately 2010. As a result, people are busy—working more hours and spending less time on tourism and leisure. Americans are taking less vacation days than ever before, which one might expect to have a negative impact on the tourism and leisure industry. On the contrary, annual monetary spending on tourism and leisure is at a record high. Yes, Americans are vacationing less, but they are spending exponentially more per vacation. As travelers have become more price elastic and less time elastic, tourism and leisure industries (including the snow skiing industry) have raised prices to profit from this change in consumer behavior.

Tourism and leisure literature discusses the appearance of ‘work martyrdom’ in the 21st century at length, citing this phenomenon as the reason why Americans are using less and less vacation days each year. A ‘work martyr’ is an employee who regularly forfeits downtime and time off in order to show dedication to his/her job. It is the thought that taking a vacation or leaving work at a reasonable hour is displaying a lack of commitment to one’s occupation, and will be perceived negatively by the boss. 39% of employees want to be seen as work martyrs by their boss (U.S. Travel Association, June 2016), and 80% of employees would take more time off if they did not feel discouraged to do so by their boss (U.S. Travel Association, August 2016). When writers say “time off” in this context, they do not mean playing hooky from work. These studies refer to American employees who choose not to use their contractually allotted vacation days. With the millennial generation’s entrance into the American workforce, the work martyr mentality has become even more severe. Having grown up in a period in which forfeiting vacation time is smiled upon, millennials are vacationing less than any generation before. 48% of millennials want to be seen as work martyrs (U.S. Travel Association, Aug. 2016). Yet, study shows that work martyrdom does not boost an employee’s chance of getting a raise or bonus (Oxford Economics, 2014), nor does it materially increase overall company productivity or

profitability (Mohn, 2014). Still, work martyrdom continues to permeate the American workforce, and people are using less vacation days each year (Oxford Economics, 2014). I will make no attempt to argue the absurdity of this phenomenon. For the purposes of this thesis, it is only necessary to understand that the trend is taking place—U.S. travel and tourism consumers are vacationing less and less days each year—21 days on average in 1995, 16 days on average in 2013, 12.5 days on average in 2016 (Oxford Economics, 2016). Americans are vacationing almost half the amount they did twenty years ago, meaning that they are spending almost half the time on travel and tourism as they once did. Even still, total annual American tourism and leisure spending is higher than it has ever been, up 27% since 2010 (U.S. Travel Association, 2015).

On the supply side, unemployment among leisure & hospitality workers has halved since the end of the recession. It has decreased from 1.8 million in 2010 to 900,000 in 2016. Leisure & hospitality wages have experienced healthy growth since the recession as well. Average leisure & hospitality wages have increased faster, up 19% since 2010, than average wages across all industries which are up only 17% since 2010 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). Overall, industry employment is up and workers are being well compensated as the industry grows.

Being such a broad topic of study, my research on the condition of the U.S. tourism & leisure industry found an overwhelming abundance of literature on the subject. As a result, it is difficult to point to one or two key contributors, as there are hundreds of influential scholars in this field. Although, there were several sources which I found to be particularly useful during my research. The United States Travel Association regularly publishes easily accessible reports and market data. The association conducts studies and consolidates information that offers insight on the current and historical state of the tourism and leisure industry. Oxford Economics

also publishes a considerable amount of research in this area. The US Travel Association and Oxford Economics are often cited by scholars and reporters of the industry. In addition, the US Federal Reserve Bank provides abundant current information on the industry via the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

At this time, the primary concern of Tourism & Leisure writers appears to be the change in consumer behavior. Specifically, consumers are spending too much time at work and not enough time traveling. Observers are particularly concerned that millennials, who take less time off than any generation to ever come before, will drastically change the dynamics of the tourism and leisure industry. Although, record high spending brings comfort to the industry.

2.2: The Sports Tourism Industry – Literature Review

A subset of the broader tourism and leisure industry, sports tourism is the “the experience of travel to engage in or view sport-related activities,” and can be segmented into three primary categories: sport event tourism, active sport tourism, and nostalgia sport tourism (Ross, 2001). Sport event tourism, as its name suggests, is travelling to view a sporting event. Active sport tourism is travelling in order to recreationally participate in a sport. Nostalgia sport tourism involves traveling to famous sport-related attractions, such as sporting halls of fame, museums or historic venues. Of these three categories, sport event tourism (also called “passive sport tourism”) and active sport tourism are the most common by a large margin. Nostalgia sport tourism and sport event tourism are often lumped together and called passive sport tourism. Active sport tourism (also called “adventure tourism”) is largely made up of destination action sports (also called “extreme sports”) like surfing, climbing, biking, kayaking/rafting, and, of course, snow skiing and boarding. As a result, my focus is on active sport tourism. Although, it

is interesting to note that passive sport tourism is experiencing strong growth and is becoming a leading contributor to the tourism and leisure sector as a whole (Schumacher, 2015).

Active sport tourism has also experienced significant growth over the last two decades with the rise in popularity of action sports. A 2007 report comments, “what started as a niche activity defined by rebellious youth performing outrageous stunts, action sports have now firmly entrenched themselves in the threads of American society. This year more than 22 million athletes will participate in ‘extreme sports’ like skateboarding, BMX riding, surfing, and snowboarding” (The Active Network). More recently, a 2015 report forecasts that “by 2020, extreme sports will challenge professional and collegiate team sports for the title of most-watched category of sports content” (Bronson, 2015). The global adventure tourism market is forecasted to grow at a compound annual growth rate (“CAGR”) of 45.99% during the period of 2016-2020 (Sandler Research). Action sports viewership and active sports tourism has experienced tremendous growth in recent years, and this growth is expected to continue in the coming years.

Active sports tourism academics study participant (consumer) behavior, motivation and perception, as well as destination location and sustainability. During my research, I found that The Journal of Sport & Tourism contains a wealth of literature on the subject. The active sports tourism literature appears to be largely led by the voices of Tom Hinch and James Higham. These scholars study participant behavior, motivation and perception at length, using mode of experience and achievement orientation to develop a framework for classifying and understanding active sport tourists (Hinch, 2010). According to mode of experience theory, the environment is experienced in one of “three ways: in terms of the activity, the place, or the social group” (Hinch, 2010). The concept of achievement orientation “holds that people evaluate their

success in one (or both) of two ways: ego (e.g. ‘being the best’) and task (e.g. ‘doing your best’)” (Hinch, 2010). Achievement orientation pushes tourist athletes to seek out more challenging activities, which are provided by travel to more extreme destinations (Moularde, 2016). These destinations serve as the spatial context in which sports tourism is produced and consumed (Higham, 2005). As a result, sports tourism naturally “draws on local resources and forms part of the complex dynamic of community life. Sports tourism therefore has implications for destination residents who may benefit from, or incur the costs of this development, with potential impacts ranging across the local-global spatial spectrum” (Hinch, 2016). As such, Hinch, Higham, and other scholars in the field critically question the economic and social sustainability of sports tourism destinations (Hinch, 2016).

To summarize, the sports tourism industry consists of both passive and active tourism. The industry is experiencing tremendous growth in both of these categories. Active tourism can largely attribute its growth to the explosion in popularity of action sports (skate, bike, surf, snow), which are projected to grow to be even more popular than traditional sport forms by as soon as 2020. Scholars study active sports tourism from the perspective of the consumer and the destinations (the consumed), questioning the economic and social sustainability of these locations and their communities. In the coming chapters of this thesis, I conduct a similar analysis of downhill snow skiing, studying the sport’s participant groups and the economic and social sustainability of ski resorts and ski town communities.

2.3: The Snow Skiing Industry – Literature Review

Snow skiing has a long and fascinating origin story dating back to approximately 6,000 BC. It began as a means of transportation and hunting in prehistoric winter climates. In the late 18th century, it served as an advantage in wartime travel for the Norwegians. Then, over the last

several hundred years, it slowly developed into the leisure sport we know it as today (Huntford, 2008). The development of modern skiing only began in earnest approximately fifty years ago with the invention of the rope tow (Fry, 2006). Now, the sport has over fourteen million yearly participants in North America alone, and the industry boasts a rapidly growing 3.2 billion in annual revenue (Snowsports Industries America, 2014; Alvarez, 2015).

The success of the North American snow skiing industry is highly correlated with per capita disposable income and U.S. employment growth. Other key external drivers of the industry include average annual precipitation, time spent on leisure and sports per capita, domestic trips by U.S. residents, and inbound trips by non-U.S. residents (Alvarez, 2015).

In addition, government regulation in the industry is extremely high due to the fact that virtually all North American ski resorts are situated on U.S. Forest Service land (Briggs, 2001), making them subject to strict regulations which govern commercial development (Thompson, 2012). This regulatory environment is highly favorable to existing resort operators. First, it prevents new competition from entering the market. Vail Resorts CEO, Robert Katz, comments that “it’s pretty much impossible to open a new major ski resort now on account of it cannot be in conflict with the environment regulations” (Thompson, 2012). Second, it gives resort operators sole ownership of the land and its improvements, giving resorts complete power over the economic structures of ski towns. The larger resort towns are more like “a cruise or amusement park, where vertical integration means vertical integration. From village to peak, [the resort] owns all the key businesses—equipment rentals, lodging, food and beverage, and snow school” (Thompson, 2012).

The environment plays a large role in the snow skiing industry as well. Due to snow skiing’s dependence on freezing temperatures and precipitation, the sport and the industry rely

heavily on the condition of the environment. No snow... No skiing industry. As concentrations of greenhouse gasses in the earth's atmosphere continue to increase, climate patterns appear to be shifting in a direction that threatens the sustainability of the snow skiing industry (Bagley, 2015). Even with the development of advanced snow making machines, resorts need temperatures below freezing to operate. In addition, individual ski mountains have delicate natural ecosystems that can be harmed if not properly preserved (MacIntosh, 2013; Mincyte, 2009).

Recently, the snow skiing industry has become highly consolidated. Over the last decade, some of the largest resorts in North America have been amalgamated under one large corporate banner. Today, Vail Resorts, Inc. dominates nearly 50% of the market share. Its closest competitor is Intrawest with 9% market share (Alvarez, 2016). When I explain the scope Vail Resorts' dominance in the snow skiing industry to friends, I ask them to name every ski resort that they have ever heard of. Vail Resorts always owns at least 5 of the 6-7 that they can come up with off the top of their head. This consolidation has helped Vail Resorts limit idiosyncratic risk, take advantage of economies of scale, and develop a deep understanding of snow skiing consumers across the continent. Furthermore, the corporation's position grants it substantial control over the nature of the industry as a whole.

In summary, the snow skiing industry is characterized by high regulation, impenetrable barriers to entry, environmental dependence, and corporate consolidation. It is a mature industry in which performance is highly correlated with excesses in disposable income, high vacation and leisure expenditure, and average annual precipitation. Despite all this, the industry has grown at a healthy rate of 2.6% annually since 2010, and is expected to continue to grow in the future (Alvarez, 2015).

2.4: Lifestyle Sport Dynamics & Culture – Literature Review

The academic literature on what I refer to as ‘lifestyle’ sports emerged in the late 1980s with Nancy Midol’s analysis of what she called the ‘whiz’ sports movement in France (Midol 1993). Over the years, the category has been called by many names, including ‘whiz’, ‘extreme’, ‘lifestyle’, ‘alternative’, ‘action-sports’, ‘expressive sports’, ‘panic sport’, ‘postmodern’, ‘post-industrial’, and ‘new sports’ (Wheaton, 2004). Whatever name you call it by, the category includes a range of avant-garde sport forms which can be characterized by the unique subcultures they produce, and by the alternative sporting values they embrace—anti-competitiveness, personal freedom and expression, and community (Midol and Broyer, 1995; Wheaton, 2013). In the early 2000s, Belinda Wheaton, Principal Research Fellow in Sport and Leisure Cultures at the University of Brighton, began publishing significant academic contributions to the literature of this category. She consolidated the previously scattered literature, and named the category ‘lifestyle sport’. After extensive study of several of these alternative sport forms, particularly windsurfing, Wheaton found that “participants described the activities ‘as a lifestyle’ rather than a sport,” and a “particular *style of life* was central to the meaning and experience” of these sport forms (2004). Previous names for the category had been given by mainstream media and marketers in an “attempt to capitalize on a wave of oppositional sports forms, and, by doing so, for corporations such as ESPN to appropriate trendy oppositional forms” (Rinehart, 2000). As a result, Belinda Wheaton, and the category’s academic community, has adopted the name ‘lifestyle sport’. Although, lifestyle sport scholars often still use some of the other names in their writing as well, so be on the lookout.

Lifestyle sports include a myriad of individualized sporting activities, such as surfing, skating, biking, climbing, snow skiing and boarding, and other emerging activities like B.A.S.E.

jumping (which involves jumping off of Buildings, Antennas, Spans, and/or Earth (cliffs)). A lifestyle sport is unique because the way in which it is experienced is intimately linked with the sport's culture (Wheaton, 2013). That is to say, a change in a lifestyle sport's culture directly impacts the sport's meaning, expression, and overall significance in the minds of its actors. This is due to the fact that a lifestyle sport's experience is intrinsically tied to the values that the sport represents. Being thus, much of snow skiing's significance as a sport relies on the individuals and communities who live dedicated to the art, action and culture of riding down a mountain.

In recent years, the popularity of lifestyle sports has exploded. As noted in section 2.2 of this review, "by 2020, extreme sports will challenge professional and collegiate team sports for the title of most-watched category of sports content" (Bronson, 2015). Millions of youths now aspire to grow up to be like Tony Hawk, Shaun White, Shane McConkey or Dave Mirra. Billion dollar industries have formed around lifestyle sports such as snow skiing, skating and biking.

2.5: The Corporatization of the Snow Skiing Industry – Literature Review

The consolidation and corporatization of ski resorts is changing the snow skiing industry. Vail Resorts Inc. now makes up nearly 50% of the industry, its closest competitor being Intrawest Corporation with an 9% market share (Alvarez, 2016). The industry is being gathered under one banner, and snowsports scholars and participants are not sure what to make of it. On one hand, Vail Resort's recent efforts have been wildly successful, producing a strongly diversified and profitable business model (Fisher, 2016). However, others claim that Vail Resorts and others like it are destroying the sport's culture and spirit, not to mention marginalizing and underpaying local populations (Davis, 2015). Some have begun to refer to Vail Resorts as "the evil empire of the Rockies" (Teton Gravity Research). Evil empire or not, it appears to be here to stay.

The literature here is limited to news and blog articles, with no academic study or research tying the abundant commentary together. The majority of writers on this subject are the most concerned about Vail Resort's industry dominance. Some writers point out the silver linings of the corporation's industry position. Others have different opinions, such as Andrew Pridgen who published an article titled "Vail Resorts wants to f*ck the ski biz... and your girlfriend" (2014). In other less profane but equally passionate criticisms, authors express their concerns about Vail's massive control over the industry, and the effects that the corporation has had on ski town communities (Carr, 2009; Hansman, 2016; Brendza, 2016). For example, Will Brendza, a Vail local, comments on the effects of corporate commercialization on ski towns saying, "The price of passes, equipment, and lodging seems to be constantly on the rise. Ski resorts can hardly grow fast enough to accommodate tourist numbers. Small ski mountains have become an endangered species. And little by little, the magic that made these mountains local is ebbing, with every new six-person lift, every new hotel, every new parking structure. We lose something" (2016).

While many holler "Evil Empire," and shout that Vail Resorts' monopoly is destroying snow skiing, some have taken a less popular stance. Devon O'Neil, for example, encourages the skiing community to set its emotion aside and evaluate the situation pragmatically. In late 2016, Vail Resorts acquired Whistler Blackcomb, which dropped many jaws in the skiing world. O'Neil compares this acquisition to the Coke of skiing buying the Pepsi of skiing commenting, "we are not heading toward a day when one company dominates the industry. That day is here; the Whistler sale only confirmed it once more." But, is the ski industry healthier when families and independent businesspeople own and operate the resorts, or would it be better for a thriving public corporation to own and operate many of them? Many families and small owners are

selling because it is what they believe to be best for their ski area's longevity. The industry landscape is changing rapidly due to climate change, varying consumer demand, and an increasingly corporate developed world. These factors and more make the old model of ski resort management nigh on impossible. Vail Resorts' business model benefits from economies of scale, risk diversification, and financial depth, allowing it to succeed in spite of these new industry challenges. O'Neil, as a passionate skier himself, urges snow skiing and snowboarding communities to figure out how to thrive in this changing industry instead of wailing that the capitalists have figured out how to make snow skiing profitable. As you can see, each side of the conflict is passionate about its point of view. I argue that, as it typically is, the best solution is somewhere in the middle.

While there are many newspaper and blog articles on the subject, at this time, there is no academic discussion concerning the corporatization of the snowsports industry. This thesis contributes by providing an academic analysis of the relationship between corporate capitalism and cultural art form in the context of downhill snow skiing. While art form needs capitalism, and capitalism in these settings relies on cultural art form, their relationship is tenuous. In many cases, capitalists' efforts to maximize profit threatens the authenticity of the art forms they endorse. Yet in other cases, artists' complete rejection of capitalism has led to bankruptcy.

2.6: The Social Concerns of the Snow Skiing Industry – Literature Review

As the skiing industry changes, so do the socio-cultural structures, patterns, and groups involved with sport. The recent commercialization and corporatization of snow skiing, while good for short-term business, has damaged the 'ski bum' culture. As corporations look to streamline resort operations, maximize efficiency and minimize costs, local ski town populations are being overworked, underpaid, and in many cases, economically forced to abandon their lives

in the mountains (Clifford, 2002). Corporations are waging an outright attack on traditional ‘ski bum’ culture, because they perceive it as bad for business. As a finance student myself, I must admit that no professor has ever mentioned ‘bums’ as being a beneficial factor of any practical business plan. What these corporations fail to understand, however, is the distinct value that the unique ‘ski bum’ culture contributes to the essence of snow skiing as a sport and an industry. Many claim that with the marginalization and disappearance of the sport’s distinct subculture, so goes the spirit and allure of the sport itself (Evans, 2010).

The literature in this area is comprehensive, but there is not much of it. Mark Stoddart and Holly Thorpe are two of the only scholars who have taken the work of Belinda Wheaton, Robert Rinehart and other lifestyle sport experts and applied it specifically to snow skiing (Thorpe 2004, 2011; Stoddart 2012). In addition to these contributions, Jeremy Evans’s *Story of America’s Disappearing Ski Bum* offers a collection of primary accounts from several prominent ski towns in the west, recounting the stories of locals there who have either flourished or fled due to the rapidly changing industry landscape. While writers will continue to analyze snow skiing through a lifestyle sport lens, the literature’s next step appears to be in Evans’s direction: the analysis of the corporatization of snow skiing and the impacts of this corporatization on skiing culture, identity and lifestyle. However, where Evans falls short, I believe, is in his failure to connect his primary accounts to the academic literature on lifestyle sport, sociology of sport, etc. I intend to conduct research similar to Evans’s, but in the context of the current academic literature, using the tools provided by Wheaton, Rinehart, and others to examine and interpret the social and cultural landscape of downhill snow skiing in North America.

2.7: Conclusion of Literature Review

Thus far, we have addressed the industry precedents (the tourism & leisure industry and the sports tourism industry) of the snow skiing industry. We have looked at the factors which govern each of these broader industries, and identified the change taking place in them. We have observed the nature of snow skiing from an industry perspective (regulation, barriers to entry, environmental dependence, etc.). We have introduced the subject of lifestyle sport dynamics & culture, emphasizing the avant-garde values which lifestyle sports embrace (anti-competitiveness, personal freedom and expression, and community) and the unique connection between culture and experience of these unconventional sport forms. We have briefly discussed the massive consolidation and corporatization taking place in the snow skiing industry, and have introduced the idea that art-form and sport-form related industries depend on a delicate balance between profitability/industrialization and the authenticity of the art/sport-form. Finally, we quickly introduced the social and cultural implications of snow skiing corporatization. In the next three chapters, I will expand upon the topics of lifestyle sport dynamics & culture in the context of snow skiing, social power in snow skiing, and snow skiing corporatization and its sociocultural impacts. My research uses primary research interviews and application of existing academic literature (much of which was referenced in previous sections of this review).

Chapter 3: Lifestyle Sport Culture in Snow Skiing

3.1: What Are Lifestyle Sports?

What are lifestyle sports exactly? Belinda Wheaton addresses this question in *Understanding Lifestyle Sports* (2004) with a list of ten defining characteristics of lifestyle sport and culture which I have summarized below. However, she importantly notes that this list is not exclusive or an “ideal-type,” which would suggest that these activities are “homogenous, fixed and unchanging.” By nature, lifestyle sports are diverse, fluid and innovative. Even so, here are some simple guidelines for understanding them:

- These sports are a historically recent phenomenon, and include activities that have emerged over the past several decades.
- The emphasis of these sports is on ‘grass roots’ participation. They are fundamentally about participation, not spectating. However, Rinehart adds that part of the experience does involve being seen, whether this be in live settings or in mediated forms (2000).
- The sports are based around the consumption of technologically new objects (boards, bikes, skis, etc.), and embrace continuous change and innovation.
- Involve significant commitment “in time, and/or money and a style of life and forms of collective expression, attitudes and social identity that develops in and around the activity.”
- Emphasize a participatory ideology that promotes “fun, hedonism, involvement, self-actualization, flow, living for the moment, adrenalin rushes and other intrinsic rewards.”
- Denounce, and even resist in some cases, institutionalization, commercialization, and regulation.

- Emphasize the creative, aesthetic and performative expressions of their activities rather than viewing them as competitive win-loss games. Many practitioners refer to their activities as art. Rinehart often refers to lifestyle sports as ‘expressive sports’ (1998).
- Predominantly individualistic in form. That is to say, the sports are not team based.
- The sports are non-aggressive activities that do not involve bodily contact, although they do embrace and even fetishize notions of risk and danger.
- The spaces of consumption are “new or appropriated outdoor ‘liminal’ (Shields, 1992) zones,” and are cultural spaces in which participants ‘blend with’ or ‘become one with’ the sea, pavement, or mountain.

Although this list was written in 2004, these principles still aptly apply to virtually all lifestyle sports. Some new activities such as B.A.S.E. jumping or parkour do not necessarily revolve around the use of specific “technologically new objects” (board, bike, skis, etc.) as mentioned in bullet three, however these activities do put significant emphasis on continuous change and innovation. Still, these guidelines for identifying and understanding lifestyle sport forms and cultures remain extremely useful nearly fifteen years later.

3.2: Culture Defines Lifestyle Sport Experience

In her 2013 work *The Cultural Politics of Lifestyle Sports*, Belinda Wheaton explains that lifestyle sports are unique because their experience is intimately linked to the culture of the sport. The meaning, expression, and overall significance of a lifestyle sport is directly impacted by, and often determined by, the sport’s culture. As a result, these sports are characterized by the unique subcultures that surround them. Regardless of your familiarity with lifestyle sports, you are likely aware of the devout and exceptionally odd followings that surround these sports. These

cult-like followings tend to have distinct clothing styles, strange lingo, unique attitudes, and an extreme obsession with their sport, and are often stereotyped by outsiders. Think of a ‘surfer bro’, a ‘skate rat’, or a ‘ski bum’. The images below (Figure 3) show icons in each of these three lifestyle sports:

Figure 3



Owen Wright – Pro Surfer



JP Auclair – Pro Skier



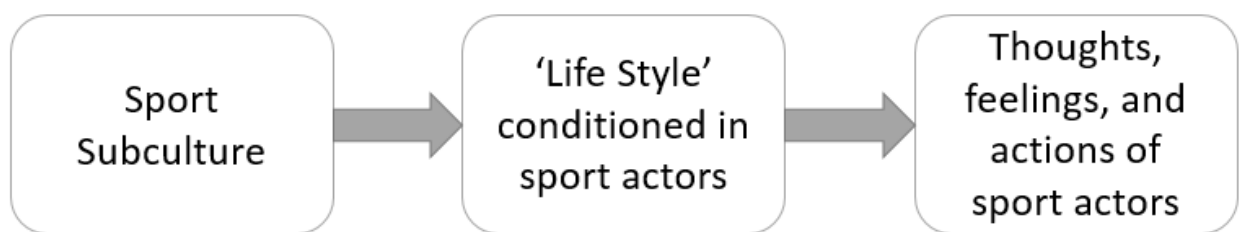
Rob Dyrdek – Pro Skateboarder

The image on the left illustrates the long hair and Zen appearance characteristic of surfing. The image on the right displays the slightly more punkish swagger typical of skateboarding. Finally, the image in the middle shows the long hair and shaggy beard of a snow skier, with a beanie that he wears regardless of the weather outside (female ski bums share a similar look, just without the beard).

Of course, these are all just stereotypes, but it is interesting to note that each lifestyle sport has a distinct stereotype beyond just ‘athlete’. This is due to the strong and distinct subcultures present in all lifestyle sports. These subcultures are not coincidence; in fact, they have been identified as being just as important to the nature of these sports as the literal actions of surfing a wave, skating a half-pipe, or skiing down a mountain.

Many scholars (Wheaton, Rinehart, Thorpe, and others) consider these subcultural structures to be even more important to the essence of lifestyle sports than literal experience. This is because culture defines experience in these sporting contexts, not the other way around. Lifestyle sport subcultures promote certain lifestyles (hence the name *lifestyle* sport). That is to say, they encourage and instill certain mindsets, values, preferences, and outlooks in group members. The term ‘lifestyle’ was first used in the early 1900s by Alfred Alder, an Austrian medical doctor and psychologist. He defined ‘life style’ (also called ‘style of life’) as a fundamental psychological structure “in accordance with which an individual thinks, feels, and acts” (Alder, 2006). If lifestyle sport subcultures define the type of ‘life style’ conditioned in group members, and ‘life style’ defines the way group members think, feel, and act, then lifestyle sport subcultures indirectly define the way group members think, feel, and act as they engage in their sport.

Figure 4



The dependence structure illustrated in the above figure (Figure 4) is the reason why culture is so important to lifestyle sport forms. Subculture produces ‘life style’, and this ‘life style’ defines experience. The research of Belinda Wheaton and others (Kiewa, 2002; Lewis, 2004; Robinson, 2008; Beal and Weidman, 2003) indicates that lifestyle sport participants describe their activity “as a ‘lifestyle’ rather than a sport,” and it became evident during their

research processes that “a particular *style of life* was central to the meaning and experience” of these activities (Wheaton 2004).

This research was conducted primarily in the context of surfing, windsurfing, and climbing, but my primary and secondary research on the lifestyle sport of snow skiing showed the same results. Snow skiing subculture embraces a unique ‘style of life’ which is integral to actors’ experience out on the mountain. When asked the question, “why do you like to ski?” Snow skiers residing in ski towns across North America consistently replied with answers having to do with personal freedom, self-actualization, engagement with the natural landscape, and most often, cultural or community involvement. One man in Telluride, Colorado looked at me from across a ski lift and replied, “If you have to ask that question, son, you don’t understand a damn thing about this place.”

The point is that all answers referenced the values that snow skiing represents, not aspects of the literal experience. The man in Telluride took my question as a display of cultural ignorance, implying that if I understood the culture, I would understand why he skis and why others ski. Snow skiing’s passionate and unique culture promotes a distinct lifestyle, and this lifestyle defines the experience of the sport’s actors.

3.3: The Ski Bum Lifestyle

As determined in the previous section (3.2), lifestyle sports’ strong subcultures instill a distinct set of values, preferences, and behaviors in group members. Following Alfred Alder, we call this the ‘life style’ of the group members. This ‘life style’ influences the way that individuals think, feel, and act—especially as these thoughts, feelings, or actions relate to their sport. Being a lifestyle sport, snow skiing subculture inspires a unique ‘life style’ in its

members. This 'life style' is commonly referred to as 'the ski bum lifestyle'. The term 'ski bum' is a formerly stigmatizing label that has been reappropriated by the snow skiing community into a positive cultural descriptor. The process of reappropriation is the revaluation of an originally derogatory given name into an empowering title embraced by members of the in-group (Galinsky, 2003). Other (inapplicable but interesting) examples of reappropriated names include 'Prime Minister', 'Jesuits', 'Handicap', 'Impressionist', and perhaps most recently, 'Obamacare'. All of these terms began as derogatory or criticizing labels, but have been transformed by in-group members into positive descriptors. According to ski lore, the term 'ski bum' was first used by outsiders as an insulting label that criticized ski fanatics for their lack of ambition and irresponsible lifestyles. A long-time Lake Tahoe local joked that the givers of this name simply misunderstood the motivations of these ski fanatics. He said that they have plenty of ambitions, it just so happens that all of these motivations have to do with snow skiing. Over time, the snow skiing community has come to embrace the 'ski bum' label with affection and pride.

So, what exactly does the term 'ski bum' mean today? Jeremy Evans (2010) defines it well in the opening page of his book, *In Search of Powder: A Story of America's Disappearing Ski Bum*:

Ski bum (skē-bəm): Any person who dedicates their life to skiing or snowboarding during the winter. Not usually homeless but can appear as such in the early stages; work is considered a necessary interruption insofar as skiing or snowboarding is not impeded by the act of working; cramped living conditions, menial jobs, infrequent mating, low pay and daily insolvency are some of the sacrifices required until one's situation becomes dialed in, which may include a spouse and home

ownership opportunities; powder days, however, make this voluntary substandard of living acceptable, even desirable, to people who are professionally capable of much more and socially are living below the standard of a person with a similar educational background.

Although Evans includes this definition partially for comedic effect, it is remarkably consistent with the answers that I received during my research. Interviewees said that a ski bum is someone who is willing to work for below minimum wage, sleep on a couch, and forego many other standard comforts in exchange for the opportunity to ski 80+ days per year.

The existence of ski bums and ski bum culture points to the exceptionally high commitment of resources required to fully engage in snow skiing as a lifestyle sport. As I mentioned earlier in section 3.1, Wheaton explained that it is typical for lifestyle sports to require significant commitment “in time, and/or money and a style of life and forms of collective expression, attitudes and social identity that develops in and around the activity” (2004). Snow skiing is the most extreme example of this. The sport is set apart from the rest by the enormous commitment of resources required. One can engage in skating and biking, for example, in virtually any city in the country for a negligible amount of money. I typically skateboard every day, and it only costs me about \$100 per year (\$40 for a board; \$60 for skate shoes). This is not the case with snow skiing. The incredibly high living costs, the expensive gear, and the limited job opportunities available in ski towns are just a few of the costs associated with snow skiing. Living in a ski town is an economical challenge, and it is only getting more and more difficult. As a result, ski town communities are full of people who really, really want to be there—people who are willing to make enormous sacrifices in exchange for the opportunity to engage in the sport and culture that they love. This commitment forms a deep bond between the individuals of

these communities. It is a bond which transcends traditional social and cultural barriers like race, class, gender and age, and makes up the core of snow skiing subculture—a subculture made up of bums, by choice, who are dedicated to the sacrificial and passionate snow skiing ‘life style’.

Chapter 4: Snow Skiing and Social Power: Race, Class, & Gender

This section examines skiing from a sociocultural perspective, looking at cultural values and attitudes including factors of race, class and gender. As stated in the previous section (3.3), the ski bum lifestyle and culture is a group bonded through sacrifice and passion for their sport. In practice, this bond transcends traditional social and cultural factors like race, class, gender and age. Still, there are significant racial stigmas and social barriers associated with skiing. This can be seen by the overwhelming whiteness of tourist, professional, and lifestyle snow skiers. In addition, the sport is largely associated with upper-class leisure and consumption. As for gender, social barriers in snow skiing culture are relatively low. Holly Thorpe is the leader of the academic discussion on gender issues in snowsports, and I reference her work significantly below, largely deferring to her expertise on the matter. Observational and interview research showed that internally (that is for local ski town communities), factors of race, class and gender present little barrier to subgroup inclusion and status due to snow skiing culture's strong emphasis on sport participation and performance. In other words, if you live a life dedicated to skiing, and you shred it up on the mountain, you merit the community's respect and affection—it does not matter if you are black or white, male or female, poor or rich, eighty or twelve. Even so, external stigmas remain, largely due to the extreme White upper-class resort culture of ski town tourists. Annie G. Coleman, for example, in her work *Ski Style: Sport and Culture in the Rockies* asserts that “whiteness, wealth, and sex characterize skiing's consumer culture and resort landscape” (2004).

4.1: Race in Snow Skiing Culture

Perhaps the largest of these external stigmas has to do with race. In 1979, Harry Edwards published an article that explained that “the high visibility of Black athletes in a handful of

popular sports had obscured ‘the fact that virtually all other American sports remain largely segregated and lily white’ (Edwards, 1979). Since that time, of course, Tiger Woods has become the most well-known athlete in the traditionally White-dominated world of golf; Venus and Serena Williams have reached comparable acclaim in the majority-White sport of tennis; and, at a less spectacular level, Black athletes like Lewis Hamilton and Bill Lester in motor racing, and Grant Fuhr and Jarome Iginla in ice hockey have made inroads into other previously ‘all-White’ sports” (Harrison, 2013). Yet, snow skiing still remains largely segregated in terms of race. Hal Clifford, former editor for SKI Magazine described downhill snow skiing as “the whitest and least integrated popular sport in America” (2002). When industry professionals analyze consumer demographics, they do not even include race as a metric—whiteness is just assumed (Hudson, 2000).

In 2000, for example, researcher Simon Hudson conducted a massive study on the consumer base of the snow skiing industry. This study instructed ski resorts on the demographics of their consumers, and provided marketing and consumer targeting advice. The study examined snow skiing consumers using factors such as income, age, gender, place of residence, social class, consumption habits, etc. However, the study failed to examine race as a factor in snow skiing consumers. This is because the study assumed the whiteness of the sport. The reasons for snow skiing’s monochromatic culture are debated. Many cite cultural preferences, but others reference a strong ‘racial spatiality’ that is present underneath the sport’s surface (Harrison, 2013).

Anthony Harrison grew up in New England, USA and grew up skiing at his local resort with friends from school. He moved away for graduate school and ended up as a professor at Virginia Tech. Knowing about Harrison’s interest in skiing, a colleague at Virginia Tech invited

him to go skiing in Colorado over the winter break one year. Harrison had only ever skied at the ski areas close to his home in Western Massachusetts, where he knew many of the people from growing up there, so he was excited to go skiing out west. While skiing in this new place around new people, he was surprised when strangers kept commenting on how they had “never seen anyone ski like him before” and how they “loved to watch him ski.” People repeatedly marveled at him, asking “where he learned to ski like that.” Harrison admits that he is “a pretty good skier, but not so great that [he] deserved this special attention” (Interview. Haddad, 2013). He quickly understood that he was receiving all of this extra attention because of his race. Many of these people had probably never seen a Black man skiing before. At least, they had never seen one who was actually any good. This “peculiar experience of being a good Black skier, removed from the community of skiers that [he] grew up around, pushed [him] to look at the relationship between race and skiing” (Haddad, 2013).

Stupid assertions are sometimes made as to why African Americans do not ski, such as “Black people don’t like the cold” or “Black people don’t like the outdoors.” I think we can all agree that statements such as these can be quickly thrown out. Another common explanation for why “Black people do not ski in greater numbers posits that the cost of skiing (including ski equipment, lift tickets, getting to the mountain, and staying at the resort) is too expensive for the majority of Black Americans who, according to virtually all measures, on the whole remain an economically subordinate racial group (McArdle, 2009)” (Harrison, 2013). However, according to a study done by Gilbert Yochum and Vinod Agarwal, “there are no statistically significant differences in spending between Black and White vacationers (1999)” (Harrison, 2013). So, Harrison set out to find the real reasons for snow skiing’s extreme whiteness.

During his study of snow skiing's racial dynamics, Harrison identified several key drivers which explain why Black and other minority skiers are such a rarity. First, he points out that snow skiing is an activity and leisure preference that is culturally passed down within the family from parent to child. That is to say, if at least one of your parents is not a skier, the chance of you ending up being a skier falls dramatically. All families have different leisure and vacationing preferences, and an overwhelming amount of snow skiers admit that their skiing interest began during a family vacation. As a result, the racial segregation in snow skiing is self-propelling, and the sport continues to suffer from an extreme lack of diversity.

Harrison also argues that Black individuals avoid snow skiing because they perceive it as a White activity. "In his pioneering study of race and leisure, Randel F. Washburne (1978) argued that Black people collectively engaged in self-schema away from perceived "White" activities. To the extent that certain leisure pursuits are thought of as "White" and "Black," historical patterns of segregation are reproduced. The premise underlying this position is that Black people, as compared with White people, have a fundamentally different set of interests and inclinations regarding how to spend their leisure and tourist time" (Harrison, 2013). Although Washburne's findings have been highly disputed in recent years, his research does help to make the point that, culturally, snow skiing is not a common leisure activity for Black individuals or families.

Harrison posits that 'racial spatiality' largely explains skiing's complete lack of racial diversity. According to Harrison, "racial spatiality is founded on the perception that certain racialized bodies are expected to occupy certain social spaces and, complementarily, that the presence of other bodies creates social disruption, moral unbalance, and/or demands explanation (Carter, 2008). Because such perceptions exist at the level of ideology, and not social structure,

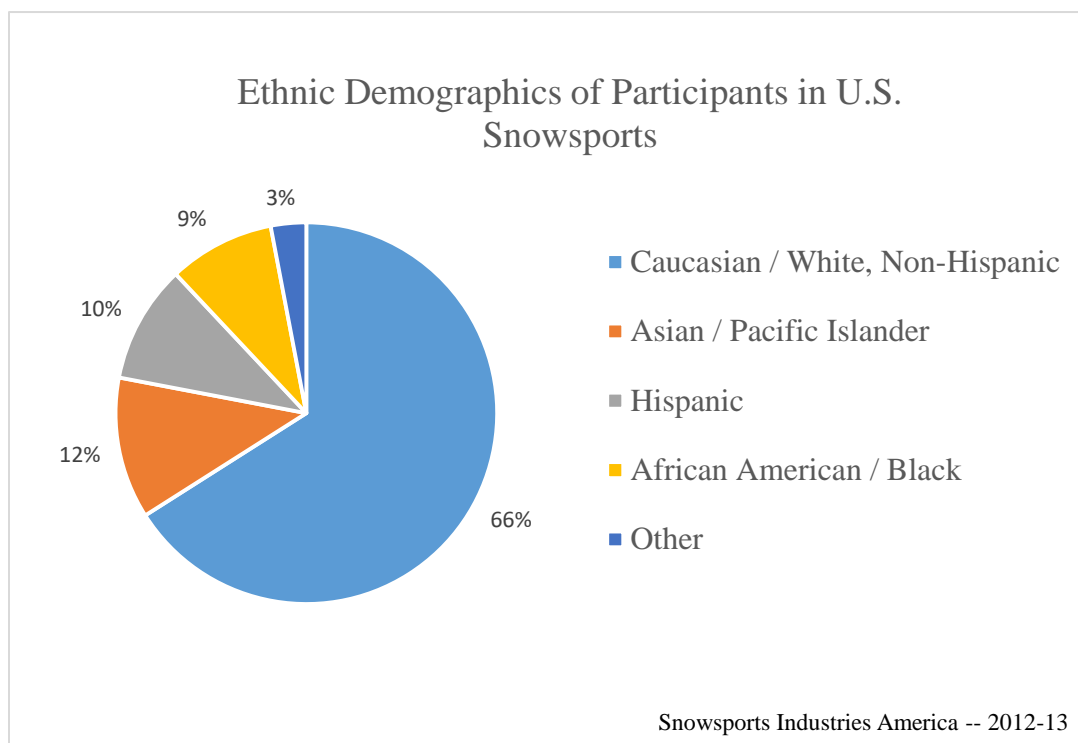
their exclusionary functions are especially hidden and enduring” (2013). This racial spatiality is perpetuated by the snow skiing industry, which markets an entirely white image of the sport, failing to appeal to a racially diverse consumer base. A Breckenridge local responded that “ski town communities are far from racist. Perhaps they were at one point in time, but they certainly haven’t been in decades. It is just that most black people simply don’t ski, so I guess the resort just doesn’t believe that diverse marketing efforts are worth the resources. The ads just wouldn’t work. It would be nice to have some more diversity around here though. Visitors at the resort can often be too much of the same thing.” Many agree with this Breckenridge local. “The failure of Black people to participate in skiing in any great numbers would (initially at least) appear to have more to do with cultural preference than unfavorable treatment,” but Harrison argues that this outlook is just a way of normalizing the severe racial spatiality that exists in snow skiing industry and culture (Harrison, 2013). He argues that, in reality, “race-based power is at work but it has become normalized to the point that people don’t even question it” (Harrison, 2013).

A reasonable businessperson would think that appealing to a diverse crowd would be good for business, bringing in new consumers to the snow skiing industry. Yet, the topic of race is rarely discussed. Harrison “surveyed Skiing magazine and other ski industry publications and was surprised to see how rarely the issue of race was brought up in discussions of skiing and diversity. In the circles [Harrison] travels, race is usually at the forefront of conversations” (2013). In snow skiing circles, the topic of race is largely avoided. Black skiing in North America is seldom even mentioned in snow skiing literature, articles or magazines. “A survey of articles published in Skiing magazine between 1993 and 2010 failed to produce a single piece dedicated to African American skiing, despite having articles dealing with: disabled skiing, gay

skiing, skiing in Africa, and skiing in Detroit—sometimes described as ‘America’s Blackest city’—and ‘Puerto Rico’s Fastest Skier’” (Harrison, 2013). The lack of diversity is systemic, and continues to be overlooked by snow ski participants and leaders.

Given Harrison’s research, and the discussion of this section thus far, the following pie chart (Figure 5) might be surprising:

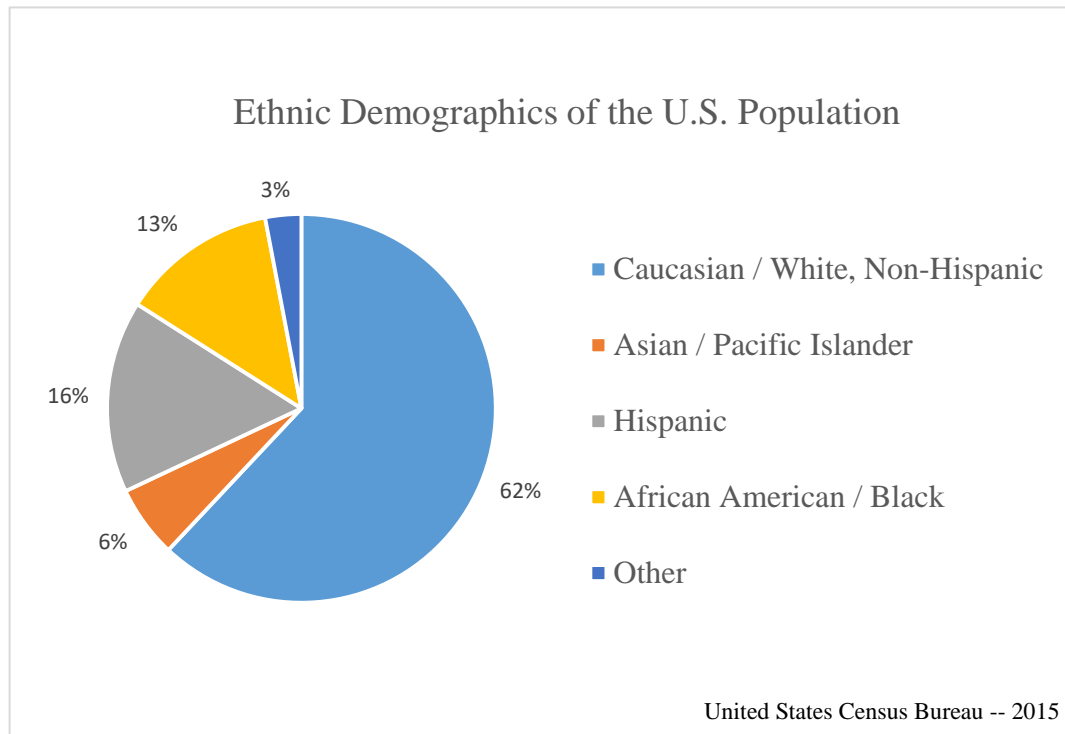
Figure 5



The above pie chart (Figure 5) shows the ethnic/racial demographics of snowsports participants in the United States based on survey data taken during the 2012-13 winter season by Snowsports Industries America. Frankly, I was extremely surprised by the amount of minority participation in snowsports, as my personal experience and research indicated a much more severe lack of diversity. For a sport widely known as being exceptionally void of diversity, with

an overwhelmingly white participant base and culture, the chart above (Figure 5) looks remarkably similar to the ethnic breakdown of the United States as a whole:

Figure 6



Snowsports Industries America was surprised with their findings as well. So surprised, in fact, that they completely redid the study three times, but the results remained consistent with their initial findings.

Clearly, strides have been made toward increased ethnic/racial diversity in snow skiing. These strides can be largely attributed to minority ski organizations. The National Brotherhood of Skiers (“NBS”), for example, have poured “considerable energies toward promoting Black people skiing” (Harrison, 2013). NBS is a large “umbrella association of 84 African-American ski clubs in 46 cities” and is the “largest ski club in the nation, with more than 14,000 members”

(Pennington, 2004). In 2016, NBS organized a trip of over 5,000 African American skiers to Lake Tahoe, California. NBS's mission is to "identify, develop and support athletes of color who will win international and Olympic winter sports competitions representing the United States and to increase participation in winter sports. It is through the local chapters, almost 60 nationwide, that the NBS provides education and opportunities to increase participation in the sport" (NBS). John Rhea, a leader of The National Brotherhood of Skiers, explains that when someone labels an activity as 'black' or 'white', it is because they have gone through a large portion of their life and they have had the time to define things with much more rigid definitions. However, if you "expose a young African American or Latino kid to snowboarding in the mountains, they won't define it as 'white', they'll define it as part of 'me'" (Morse, 2015). It will be interesting to observe how efforts such as this will impact the perceptions and preferences of the next generation.

However, Harrison still asserts that "despite their successes, Black skiing organizations have thus far failed to redefine the relationship between Whiteness and skiing" (2013). This is because much of Black ski participation occurs during large group trips which occur during non-peak weeks during the ski season (as large group ski trips of any kind commonly do. This is because ski resorts often offer group discounts and packages to bring in business during slow times of the season). As a result, on a regular day at a ski resort, the proportion of Black skiers is extremely low—less than one percent. This is the reason that, even though the demographic breakdowns shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6 are remarkably similar, snow skiing is still perceived as exclusively White. Besides these large group trips, there is little to no racial/ethnic diversity out on the hill.

To conclude, snow skiing's White social space is being highly challenged by minority skiing groups, particularly by African American groups, but snow skiing's strong racial spatiality continues to promote barriers within the sport. These barriers are perpetuated by the way in which sport participation is passed down from parents to children, and by the monochromatic imagery and non-diverse consumer marketing of downhill ski resorts. There is no active or aggressive racism present in snow skiing as a sport, a culture or an industry, but the passive dynamics discussed in this chapter create a social space that is almost exclusively white. The National Brotherhood of Skiers and other such organizations are working, and will continue to work, to break down these passive racial barriers.

The same progression of racial sporting resistance has taken place in the lifestyle sport of surfing as well (see Chapter 9 of Belinda Wheaton's work *The Cultural Politics of Lifestyle Sport*). The parallels between the resistances in each of these sporting cultures are important to note, and may provide insight on the future of snow skiing due to the similar social and cultural dynamics of the two sports. Wheaton explains that for many Black surfers, "surfing has become a politicized arena through which to confront, contest and attempt to change their individual and collective exclusion and marginality" (2013). In surfing, this intentional resistance has made tremendous strides in breaking down the barriers that once dominated the social space of the sport, suggesting that the racial sporting resistance present in snow skiing is on the right path.

Moving forward, Harrison urges us to ponder "the extent to which leisure spaces [such as the sporting spaces of surfing and snow skiing] function as mechanisms for preserving, rather than eroding, social segregation... In an increasingly diverse America, understanding how race operates in the few remaining racially homogeneous outposts of privilege is essential to the project of dismantling its power" (2013). Dr. Ben Carrington at The University of Texas in

Austin agrees, saying that our examinations of sporting resistances (such as those present in surfing and snow skiing) should be taken in the context of broader theoretical questions of race. Specifically, we should consider the broader impacts of these sporting resistances on racial formations and forms of contemporary racism in the 21st Century (Carrington, 2010).

4.2: Class in Snow Skiing Culture

Class is also a significant social barrier in snow skiing sporting culture. This barrier manifests itself both internally and externally. That is, it obstructs non-local tourists, and marginalizes poor local ski town communities.

Lower and middle class non-local snow skiing tourists are inhibited by wealth and/or social status. By far the largest barrier here is wealth. Skiing is an expensive sport, meaning that many are not able to participate due to economic limitations. This reality is difficult to object to, especially since snow skiing is a nonessential leisure activity. Personally, I would love for every person in the world to get to experience riding down a mountain. However, individuals with more money have more to spend on unnecessary leisure activities—such is the way of the world. “Is this right?” is a question that falls outside of the scope of this particular study. Such an inquiry would be a question of the justice of income disparity in capitalist society, which is not a topic that this thesis addresses. For the purpose of this study, all we need to understand is that some people have more money than others. Snow skiing and leisure activities of the like are expensive, so the participation of individuals with lower incomes is limited.

However, snow skiing is not nearly as expensive as the sport’s external upper-class image implies. The average cost of a five day ski vacation for a family of four is \$2,800 (Family Ski Hub; please note that this study does not include the price of travel). According to a study

conducted by American Express in 2014, the average yearly vacation expense for a family of four in the U.S. is \$4,580 (American Express). While American Express's study does include the price of travel, this still implies that a ski vacation is well within the budget for the average American family of four. Still, the upper-class image surrounding the sport directs many American families and individuals away from the sport. "Skiing has been and continues to be thought of as an elite, upper to upper-middle class sport. In his comprehensive study of past skiing consumer research, Hudson (2000) concludes that the perception of skiing as expensive has been a major factor in discouraging many nonskiers from taking up the sport" (Harrison, 2013). The external perception of the sport promotes an exclusive upper-class image in the minds of potential participants. "Skiing in the United States represents an American ethos, but only a certain outdoorsy upper-class, and socialite identity participates in the 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2006) of this culture" (Linden, 2014). Modern ski resorts promote this high class "imagined community," hoping to encourage an extravagant (profitable) mindset amongst consumers.

Many 21st Century ski tourists come not to ski, but to engage in the leisurely upper-class resort lifestyle offered by many large North American ski resorts. "Many ski areas are pitching their resorts as well-rounded and culturally rich, with theater, concerts, galleries and a menu of other activities that have nothing to do with skiing" (Noonan, 1997). These visitors come to engage in this conspicuous (Veblen, 1899) high class experience—an experience that, in many cases, is about "status and style as much as about physical activity" (Coleman, 2004). These consumers see local ski town communities not as rich and passionate lifestyle sport cultural groups, but as a collection of waiters, drivers, and hotel attendants. This results in the

marginalization of ski town locals, leading to a significant social and cultural divide between tourists and locals. One Aspen, Colorado local comments:

“There is a real sense of hostility around here toward tourists. It is very much an us vs. them mentality. People are always bashing tourists behind their backs and are constantly looking for new ways to complain about how the ‘f*cking tourists’ are messing things up around here. It happens because locals are tired of being treated like servants by upper-class visitors. These visitors are paying a high premium to be here, so it makes sense that they expect a full-service experience, but many locals don’t see it that way. They share their home, passion, and a large piece of their identity with these visitors, and feel like they are repaid with poor treatment and second class status.”

The two groups simply do not understand each other. Outsiders complain about lousy service; insiders complain about poor treatment. A Vail local commented, “I came here to ski, not to get yelled at all day by angry rich folks. I don’t understand how some of these people can be so upset in such an incredible place.” Visitors to ski towns tend to assume an extreme upper-class mentality as a result of the premium that they pay to be there—they are paying top dollar, and they expect top of the line service. However, these expectations marginalize ski town communities. Visitors forget that locals sacrifice much more to be there than any tourist, and often label locals as lower-class ‘bums’ instead. This creates an extreme class division between outsider and insider—served and servant. A long time Beaver Creek, Colorado resident adds that the divide is made even more dramatic by the complete lack of middle class in ski towns: “There are tourists whose incomes fall in the upper 1% of U.S. citizens, and the ski bums who serve these tourists—almost nothing in between.” While locals struggle to pay rent at small

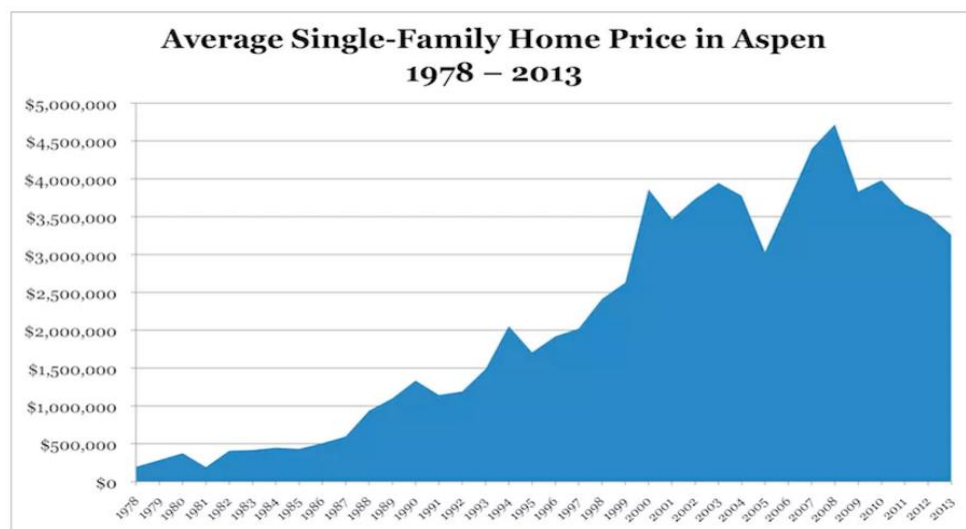
apartments twenty-five minutes outside of town, many wealthy individuals own massive, conspicuous (Veblen, 1899) ski chalets valued at millions of dollars (Figure 7).

Figure 7



These mansions sit empty fifty weeks out of the year, making ski towns ghost towns for most of the year. The “locals” are all a half hour drive away, having been forced farther and farther out of town by rising real estate prices. As an example, Figure 8 shows the escalation in the average price of a single-family home in Aspen, Colorado:

Figure 8



A minimum wage worker obviously cannot afford to live in a \$3 million home, meaning that ski towns are full of (usually empty) vacation homes and “locals” commute in from down valley. Local ski town communities become more and more dominated by the wealthy resort tourism culture each year. As a result, local ‘ski bums’ are marginalized in their own communities and the distinct culture of these communities is beginning to disappear (Evans, 2010). Because of the economic and social dynamics present in this sporting cultural space, issues of class are severe. Lower and middle class tourists are deterred, and local communities struggle.

4.3: Gender in Snow Skiing Culture

In the words of Michael Messner and Donald Sabo, sport was created “by men for men” (1990). Holly Thorpe agrees, saying that “historically, sport has been a proving ground for masculinity” (2005). The same is still largely true today, and in the vast majority of North American conventional sports, women are given less respect than they deserve. Snowsports culture, on the other hand, benefits from a totally different structure. Women have been key drivers of the development of modern snowsports culture over the last several decades. “Instead of settling for space on the margins many females took proactive roles within the culture” (Thorpe, 2005).

Movement toward gender equality in this sporting context is aided by snow skiing’s participatory lifestyle culture. As I said earlier, subgroup inclusion and status in the snowsports context is largely based on participation and performance. This means that if you live a life dedicated to skiing, and you shred it up on the mountain, you merit the community’s respect and affection—it does not matter if you are male or female. Although women have participated in

downhill snow skiing in fewer numbers than men since the sport's inception, "women participated alongside males and the activity was not 'burdened' by 'years of entrenched sexism that plagues most sports' (Robinson, 2002)." (Thorpe, 2005).

However, traditional external concepts of sport and gender have begun to slowly creep into snow skiing culture. As downhill snow skiing has become increasingly modernized, commercialized and traditionalized, old values of gender inequality have begun to reverse the sport's progressive social cultural. As an example, Holly Thorpe recalls one moment after shredding up the hill on a powder day with her buddies. A friend complemented her run saying "hey, that was pretty good *for a girl*" (2005).

The recent influx of upper-class resort culture and extreme sports media has contributed greatly to this regression in snowsports gender equality. Extreme sports media began almost exclusively marketing male snowsports athletes "when television and corporate sponsors recognized the huge potential in extreme sports as a means to tap into the young male market segment" (2005). As a result, the sport is increasingly becoming a male dominated cultural atmosphere. In addition, influence from upper-class resort culture has impacted gender roles in snow skiing. The local snow skiing subgroups are less impacted, but especially in ski tourism culture "women skiers are portrayed as passive objects of desire. There are, however, many women skiers with great ability" (Linden, 2014). On the bright side, "resort culture is so focused on fashion, socializing, and romance that women who skied fast and hard during the day could reaffirm their femininity and sexuality in the evenings" (Coleman, 2004). But should this even be necessary for female skiers? The fact that a woman's "femininity and sexuality" needs to be reaffirmed after a hard day out on the ski hill shows the increasing lack of social progressivism in this cultural space.

Gender issues in this sporting context are important to observe because gender equality appears to be moving backwards instead of forwards. As extreme sport media and traditional leisure culture take hold of the sport, conventional gender constraints infiltrate a cultural space that was once quite equal across sexes. Taken in a broader societal context, snow skiing culture pushes one to consider other cultural spaces in which this sort of backwards evolution may be taking place. Regardless, Holly Thrope assures her readers that many women are actively resisting this social development—refusing to accept the title of “Snow Bunny” and demanding the return of the “Shred Betty.”

Chapter 5: The Sociocultural Impacts of Snow Skiing Corporatization

5.1: The Corporatization of the Snow Skiing Industry

The modern downhill snow skiing industry has become a highly consolidated and corporatized industry. In 2017, the industry is dominated by one or two major corporations who largely dictate the nature of the industry. Vail Resorts, Inc. now dominates nearly 50% of the industry. Vail's closest competitors are Intrawest Corporation with 9.1% market share and Boyne Resorts with 7.9% market share (Alvarez, 2016). Together, these three industry players dominate nearly 70% of the downhill snowsports market.

About two decades ago, businessmen and businesswomen began to realize how much money there is to be made from snow skiing. Since this realization, particularly in the last decade, the snow skiing industry has undergone rapid corporatization as businesspeople have flocked to the industry. This has led to the creation of a third major people group in the snow skiing world. Previously there had only been two groups: ski town locals and snow skiing tourists. The sport's corporate movement added a new group: those who sell snow skiing. On several occasions, Hunter S. Thompson, an American journalist and an Aspen local, noted the stark contrast between those who ski and those who sell skiing. In a letter to Mike Moore of the *Skiers' Gazette*, Thomson wrote:

“There is a hell of a huge difference between skiing as a sport—or even skiing as a lifestyle—and skiing as an industry, a boom-time fad like golf or bowling... On one side are the Cops and the Mayor and the County Commissioners, along with local realtors and corporate land developers from Chicago & LA & Texas—and even NY & Boston. These people see Aspen as a resort, they want to sell it. And they

are. Indeed—for the last 20 years they’ve been selling harder than New Orleans street-pimps. The other side is a weird mix of locals, liberals, freaks, dropouts, ranchers, heads, geeks & other less commercially oriented types who see Aspen as a place to live—not to sell—a refuge of sorts” (Gibson, 2014).

This is not only true of Aspen, but also of ski towns across North America. Interviews with individuals from Vail, Telluride, Park City, Breckenridge, Lake Tahoe, and Whistler revealed that ski town locals all over the continent share Thompson’s opinions about the contrast between those who are there to engage in snow skiing as a sport, a culture and a lifestyle, and those who are there to sell skiing.

It appears that the most adept ski salesmen and saleswomen ended up in Vail, Colorado. Vail ski resort started as a small family owned ski area in 1962, IPOed as a public corporation in 1997 under the name Vail Resorts Inc. (stock ticker: “MTN”), and is now the giant of the snowsports industry. In 2017, Vail owns the majority of North America’s large ski resort areas. Vail Resorts is largely cited as the primary driver of snow skiing corporatization in North America (Brenda, 2016; Dean, 2016; Hansman, 2016; Gibson, 2014; Hartley, 2002; Clifford, 2002; and others). The corporation had 2016 revenues of 1.60 billion, and as of April 2017, has a market cap of 7.92 billion and an enterprise value of 9.27 billion (Yahoo Finance). In contrast, Vail Resorts’ closest competitor, Intrawest Corporation, had 2016 revenues of 570 million, and as of April 2017, has a market cap of 937 million and an enterprise value of 1.35 billion (Yahoo Finance). Intrawest Corporation has experienced moderate to high growth since it entered the corporate scene in early 2014, but its growth is dwarfed by Vail Resorts’ numbers. In 2013, Vail Resorts had a market cap of 1.5 billion and an enterprise value of 1.8 billion (YCharts). As of April 2017, the corporation’s market cap is 7.82 billion and its enterprise value is 9.27 billion.

As shown in Figure 9, Vail Resorts stock price has risen approximately 300% since 2013, as compared to the S&P 500 which has grown 77% since 2013.

Figure 9



Because regulatory barriers prevent new entrants to the market, industry supply is fixed. That is to say, snowsports corporations cannot simply build a new ski resort—the U.S. Forest Service no longer administers land for such purposes. As a result, much of Vail Resorts’ growth has taken place through acquisition. The more ski areas Vail Resorts acquires, the closer it gets to complete domination of the North American snowsports market. This truth has led to significant concern within the snow skiing community, especially since Vail Resorts’ behavior over the last decade indicates that the corporation is on a mission to completely take over the industry. Snow skiing spectators fear that Vail Resorts is leading the ‘Walmartification’ (Hansman, 2016) of skiing, where big businesses get larger at the expense of small business. This ‘Walmartification’ also severely impacts workers, culture and consumer choice. After Vail

Resorts' 2016 acquisition of Whistler Blackcomb, the largest resort in North America, industry observers are even more wary of the mega ski resort conglomeration. Vail Resorts' dominance brings into question the survival rate of smaller ski resorts and the sport's accessibility for the average skier (Hansman, 2016).

5.2: Vail Resorts Strategy – The Secret to the Corporation's Success

Amidst these criticisms, Vail Resorts has stood by their aggressive growth-oriented focus. From a business perspective, the corporation's strategy is efficiently managed, effectively executed, and promotes strong bottom line performance. From Wall Street's point of view, Vail Resorts' strategy and implementation is virtually flawless. In addition to Plan II, I study Finance at The University of Texas in Austin. According to my finance instruction and the metrics that business analysts typically use to evaluate performance, Vail Resorts is absolutely crushing it. 300% growth in a mature industry like the snowsports industry over 77% growth of the S&P 500 is astounding. This sort of growth in a mature industry indicates highly adept strategy and process innovation, as well as extremely effective management and business execution. Vail Resorts has streamlined operations by cutting costs and maximizing revenue. They have minimized idiosyncratic risk, and are driving strong growth through process optimization, innovative expansion, strategic integration of product/service offerings, and well-managed acquisitions.

Vail Resorts has cut costs and maximized revenue to a degree that has never been seen in the snow skiing industry before. The corporation constantly works to minimize both fixed and variable costs. The overwhelming majority of the costs associated with ski resort operations are fixed costs. These are the costs associated with keeping the resorts open and the lifts running. The two main expenses are energy costs and labor costs.

Vail Resorts has teams employed solely for the task of energy reduction, which benefits both Vail's reputation and their bottom line. Vail has installed submeters all over its resorts in order to isolate, monitor and minimize energy use at different facilities in real time. Additionally, the corporation implemented high grade insulation and roofing in all of its facilities, cutting down heating bills by more than 20% (Gross, 2010). Vail has also streamlined its vehicle use (fuel for large 'snowcat' groomers and snowmobiles is a large expense item). Vail constantly works to reduce energy costs through these initiatives and others.

Usually labor costs are considered to be a variable expense. However, in the case of ski resorts, labor is better classified as a fixed expense. This is because, no matter how many visitors the mountain has, the number of workers needed to service the resort remains the same. To minimize labor costs, the corporation has reduced and realigned its workforce, and works hard to ensure that every employee is in a necessary role (Weller, 2000). Vail's workforce is made up of members of the ski town communities surrounding the corporation's resorts—communities made up of individuals who are hopelessly addicted to skiing. This gives Vail Resorts significant power over its employees. When asked why they work for the resort, every person that I interviewed quickly replied, "For the ski pass." Vail Resorts provides each of its employees with a ski pass, and the corporation has realized that this single benefit gives it immense leverage over employees, which allows them to cut wages and benefits dramatically. Daniel Kay in his article "The Evil Genius of Vail Resorts" comments on the absolute subordination of Vail Resorts employees: "crummy management, long hours, ever-changing shifts, ridiculous overwork? 'I can't quit, they'll take away my ski pass'" (2015).

Ski resort variable cost dynamics are similar to those of amusement parks—it does not matter if you have one thousand or ten thousand visitors, the cost of operation does not

materially change. Variable costs include items such as food sales expense and lodging sales expense—costs that can only be reduced so much without negatively impacting visitor experience. To increase profit margins of these items, Vail Resorts has substantially increased prices. “People eat—or shop or stay, for that matter—in Vail because they have to. Like filling up the tank for your rental car at one of those gas stations near the airport or buying sunscreen at a resort gift shop, skiers throw down \$12 for a hot dog at Vail because they are trapped in a valley of exorbitant prices” (Peters, 2014). Vail Resorts identified that consumers do not have the option to be price sensitive when making purchases such as these because, as Peters says, they are “trapped in a valley of exorbitant prices.” To capitalize on the fact that consumers are “trapped,” Vail Resorts has implemented high levels of vertical integration in all of its ski towns. When the consumer buys his/her lift ticket—Vail. When the customer books his/her lodging—Vail. When the consumer pays for dinner down in the town—Vail. When the consumer buys a coat, piece of art, or souvenir T-shirt in one of the mountain town shops—Vail.

As a result, Vail Resorts’ understanding of its customer goes far beyond knowing how much they might be willing to pay for a hot dog. The corporation has conducted significant research on its consumers’ price elasticity and buying preferences. Vail has even started using RFID chips in lift passes to track the manner in which consumers flow throughout the resort and engage in the resort’s product/service offerings. The key insight that Vail Resorts has gained is that a significant portion of ski resort consumers are willing to pay exponentially more than the ski industry had previously believed. As a result, Vail Resorts has led a movement to dramatically increase the price of snow skiing over the past decade. For example, as shown in Figure 1 of the introduction, the price of a one day ski pass has increased by almost 200% in the last fifteen years—75% of which has taken place in the last five years! This price escalation has

occurred in virtually all other aspects of resort snow skiing as well, and other North American ski resort companies have followed suit, meaning that the price of snow skiing is 75% higher than it was just five years ago. Since it began catering to high-class consumers who are largely price elastic, Vail Resorts (and the rest of the snow skiing industry) has increased prices exponentially, searching for these consumers point of resistance on price. This point of resistance still appears to be nowhere in sight. In view of this, the gigantic jump in Vail Resorts' stock price over the past five years (Figure 9) makes sense.

In addition to boosting profit margins, Vail Resorts has mitigated risk with the creation of the "Epic Pass." Robert Katz, CEO of Vail Resorts, is a strong proponent of 'the season pass model.' Forbes reporter Daniel Fisher describes it well:

"A normal day ticket for a Vail resort is a steep \$175, so Katz introduced the Epic Pass, which gives skiers unlimited access to Vail's 13 North American resorts and one in Australia, and up to four days at 31 ski areas in Europe, for \$849. It's an unbeatable deal for skiers who plan to spend more than five days on the slopes this season. And it's a good deal for Vail, too: By getting skiers to pay up front, Vail offloads much of the risk of a light snow season onto its customers, while enticing them to buy \$15 bowls of chili and \$1,000 parkas in mountain lodges and stores. Katz expects to sell 500,000 season passes this year, pumping more than \$250 million in nonrefundable revenue into Vail's bank account, most of it before Thanksgiving." (Fisher, 2016).

This business model has been a key driver of Vail Resorts' success. The snow skiing industry is *highly* dependent on yearly snow fall. IBISWorld's 2016 industry report on "Ski & Snowboard Resorts in the U.S." cites annual precipitation as the primary external driver of industry success

or failure (Alvarez, 2016). This report and many others like it state that seasons with high snowfall result in dramatically higher ski resort visits because better snow conditions result in a better experience. The reverse is also true. Years of low snow fall can result in significant losses for ski resorts. Robert Katz's 'season pass model' eliminates this risk. Vail Resorts breaks even long before the first snow flake of the season hits the ground. In addition, owning a season pass encourages consumers to visit Vail's ski resorts more frequently. They want to "get their money's worth." However, what the consumer does not necessarily realize is that more than 50% of Vail Resorts' revenue comes from other sources such as "luxury accommodations, gourmet food, on-mountain activities that aren't skiing (like tubing or dog-sledding)," ski gear rental & maintenance, in-town shopping, etc. (Barber, 2014).

Vail Resorts' highly strategic and well executed business model has granted the corporation unprecedented financial success in the snow skiing industry. Vail Resorts has consistently astounded onlookers financially through its precise business execution, profit maximization, risk minimization, and innovative management practices. The corporation is dedicated to success, whatever the cost may be. In the words of CEO Robert Katz, "There will always be more changes, whether easy or hard to accept. The key is for us to stay ahead of whatever is coming, ready to show how our company can outperform not just in good times, but in tough times as well" (Miller, 2008).

5.3: The Severe Sociocultural Impacts of Snow Skiing Corporatization

Although Vail Resorts' profit driven treatment of snow skiing has been phenomenal for short term business success, it has begun to fundamentally change ski town communities and culture. In the last decade, ski resort corporations have gained increasing power over ski town economies, and have used their weight to dominate local communities. The resort has integrated

into the majority of ski town business establishments, meaning that most of the job opportunities in town come from the resort. As a result, when Vail Resorts and others drive down wages, they reduce the income of most of the local community. This, along with soaring living costs, has forced many ski town locals to abandon their hometowns and move away. For example, Jeremy Evans describes the Lake Tahoe local community in his book *A Story of America's Disappearing Ski Bum* as “a community where real estate prices have tripled in five years, where several hundred families—the veins of any community—have fled each year since 2000” (2010). As more and more families such as these are economically forced out, the once vibrant local ski town communities become thinner and thinner. As these communities disappear, snow skiing’s rich and distinct subculture disappears with them.

Vail Resorts and others have begun to replace their shrinking workforce with imported low-wage laborers from Mexico or other regions of Central America (Barber, 2016). This is not an uncommon practice in capitalism—minimizing labor costs is smart business. Cheap unskilled labor commonly comes in the form of low-wage immigrant labor (Williams, 2010). Utilizing this labor allows corporations to drive down costs and maximize profits—which is their primary goal (Borjas 2013). These low-wage immigrant workers live in communities that are forty-five minutes to an hour down-valley from town. For the most part, this new immigrant workforce is made up of hardworking and outstanding individuals. They provide significant value for the resort at a low cost. The problem with this new workforce is that it is there solely to work, not to ski. As a result, snow skiing participation is increasingly tourist, and less and less local.

Individuals with no dependents can still scrape by in a ski town (they live 30 minutes down valley), but the price escalation driven by Vail Resorts and others has made it economically impossible to raise a family in a ski town. As discussed in Chapter 4, a key piece

of the ‘ski bum’ subculture is the sacrifice of the group members. However, when the sacrifice required is extreme to the point of impossible, group members are forced to leave and the subculture dies. Ski town communities foundationally depend on local families, and when they leave, subcultural dynamics are severely affected.

In addition, it is important to note that all of the leading lifestyle and professional skiers were raised in ski towns. Fifteen years ago, growing up in a ski town was still possible, so local kids were able to develop the skills needed to perform on a professional stage. But now, who will replace the current generation of professional skiers? The top professional freeskiier in the world, Sean Pettit, admits that raising a family in a ski town was extremely difficult even fifteen years ago:

“When we moved from the East Coast to Whistler, I was 7 years old. Mom recognized me and my brother Callum’s incredible passion for skiing at a young age, and she moved the three of us out to Whistler. Mom was working most of the time, but me and Callum skied together every moment we weren’t in school. Obviously, we had to make sacrifices to live out here. The three of us lived in a one-room basement. Me and my brother shared the bed, and mom slept on a couch. Most of the time we would eat canned foods—you know, cream of corn, Kraft dinner—but sometimes mom would wake us up with leftover food from the restaurant when she got home late from her shift as a waitress” (The Ski Channel, Interview, 2013).

Today, low wages and high living costs implemented by large ski resort corporations make it virtually impossible to raise a child in a ski town. Unless of course, the parents have accrued considerable wealth in previous careers and have retired to raise their family in the mountains—

which is a rare occurrence. As a result, less and less sport leaders are being developed. I predict that this phenomenon will result in a shortage of snowsports leaders, and the innovation and passion that has driven snow skiing as a sport in the past will decay in future years.

When ski towns are no longer full of adoring lifestyle skiers, who will drive the spirit, passion, and culture of the sport? Looking back at Figure 4 in Chapter 3, recall that lifestyle sport subculture fosters a ‘life style’ in sport actors. This ‘life style’ determines the thoughts, feelings, and actions of snow skiing participants. Said a different way, subculture determines ‘life style’ and ‘life style’ defines experience. As the unique snow skiing subculture is damaged by the corporate takeover of the sport, the ski bum lifestyle is disappearing. As it disappears, the way snow skiing is experienced by participants is being fundamentally changed for the worse. As corporate culture infiltrates the sport, snow skiing becomes industrialized, streamlined, uniform and efficient—the opposite of the values that snow skiing culture currently represents.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

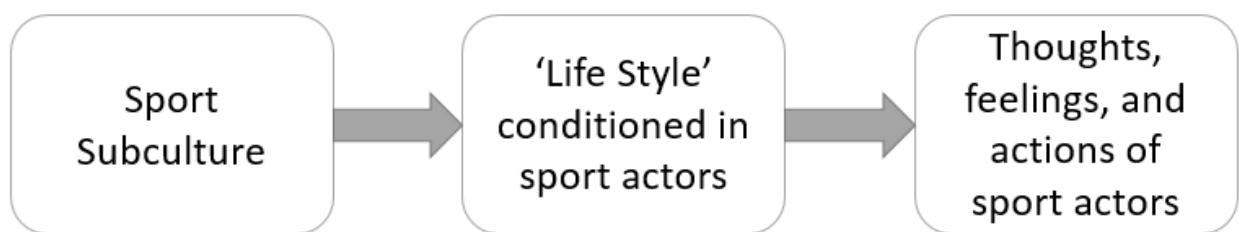
As I explained in the introduction of this thesis, I originally engaged in this study because I believed that the snow skiing industry as a whole is on a downward spiral due to price escalation which is rapidly pricing out snow skiing's tourist and local participant base. As it turned out, this hypothesis was true, but only in part. Rapid price escalation is taking place in the snow skiing industry, and snow skiing participants are being priced out. However, this has not negatively impacted the economics of the sport as I originally believed. In fact, quite the opposite is occurring. From a business perspective, snow skiing is more profitable than ever, thanks to the innovative and adept efforts of snow skiing corporations like Vail Resorts. These corporations have thrown out the previous "skiing is for everyone" business strategy, instead targeting extremely wealthy consumers. Vail Resorts and others have dramatically increased the price of skiing to capitalize on the large price elasticity of this new consumer base, and have financially flourished as a result.

Still, I argue that the snow skiing industry is on a dangerous downward spiral, but not for the economic reasons that I originally suspected. Instead, my research found that downhill snow skiing as a sport and as an industry is in danger because of cultural reasons. My finance education never taught me that cultural destruction could lead to the decay of an entire industry. Instead, I have been taught that if costs are minimized, profits are maximized and risk is effectively managed, business thrives. This is true in many circumstances, but business is not so simple in the snow skiing industry. This is due to the complex lifestyle sport dynamics present in downhill snow skiing. My research found that, at a fundamental level, lifestyle sports like snow skiing are as much cultural experiences as they are sporting experiences. That is to say,

people ski not only to engage in the action of riding down an icy hill, but also to engage in the free and profound culture that the lifestyle sport embodies.

One might expect this to be true for ‘life style’ actors, but my research found that this is also true of tourist snow skiers. As I mention in section 3.2 of this paper, I asked a number of local and tourist skiers the question “why do you like to ski?” The answer that I most often received was, “because it is fun.” Which I expected, but what I did not expect was that when I delved in to *why* it is fun, I received answers referencing personal freedom, self-actualization, engagement with the natural landscape, and most often, cultural or community involvement. Not one answer from a local or a tourist was about the physical experience of downhill snow skiing, but rather about the cultural experience that the sport offers. To explain this, I again reference Figure 4 of Chapter 3 which explains the unique nature of experience in lifestyle sporting contexts:

Figure 4



In the context of lifestyle sports, the thoughts, feelings and actions of participants are defined by the sport’s subculture. As a result, destruction of a lifestyle sport’s subculture directly damages the experience of the sport itself.

My research indicates that the snow skiing industry is in danger because corporations fail to understand the lifestyle sport’s dependence on its subculture. As businesses continue to

corporatize the sport and force out the local ski town communities, they are unintentionally destroying the subculture upon which their sport rests. As this transformation takes place, and Vail Resorts and others continue to replace the snow skiing experience of authenticity and community with uniformity and efficiency, not only does a rich subculture die, but the sport also becomes less attractive to consumers. The sport will remain—and will increasingly become—an upper class status symbol of conspicuous wealth and consumption. But, this is all the sport will be. The authentic and distinct cultural experience that characterizes downhill snow skiing will be gone.

To prevent this from taking place, solutions will need to be pursued by the major ski resort corporations. One possible solution is to include local ski town communities in the success of the resorts that they support. This could be done by helping key families and individuals within local communities to become stakeholders in the corporation that owns their resort. Corporations could increase stock option offerings to lower level employees. This way, instead of suffering at the expense of the resort, the local community could share in its success. This would help to align the incentives from the top of the corporation to the bottom. Although, this fix would likely face many challenges of its own, and is just one small solution of many that would need to take place in order to reverse the marginalization and destruction of snow skiing subculture. In further research on the snow skiing industry, solutions to this problem should be explored and tested.

Additional research areas that this thesis was not able to fully expand upon include the topics of race and class in the sporting context of downhill snow skiing. While Holly Thorpe and Annie Gilbert Coleman have been, and are still, actively studying gender issues in snow skiing, race and class in this context still remain largely unstudied. During my research, the wealth of

unstudied material in these areas quickly became apparent, and while this thesis briefly touches on these topics, there is still much research that needs to be done.

Finally, I urge you to explore and consciously engage in the beautiful sport and culture of downhill snow skiing. In the words of Telluride, Colorado legend Two Scoop Coop: “If life has been getting you down, it’s probably just because you ain’t been skiing enough.”



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